

## THE DRAMA—MUSIC.

## A NEW PLAY AT THE EMPIRE.

“MICHAEL AND HIS LOST ANGEL.”

The management of the Empire Theatre, although energetic and alert, has not at any time been characterized by that conscientious intellectual purpose and that scrupulous consideration for the public good which ought to prevail in the administration of the arts, and therefore the productions accomplished at that house are of somewhat less importance to the public than to the persons who offer them. Mere shop-keeping cannot be expected to interest the community, otherwise than as one form of contemporary industrial labor. The commodity vendied at the Empire Theatre is the morbid drama of intrigue and domestic trouble,—the drama that is typified by such plays as “The Masqueraders,” “John A. Dreams” and “Carmen.”

It is a commodity that some people like,—just as they like Lügner cheese,—but it is not one that can be considered agreeably fragrant, and it is not one that can reasonably be expected long to detain thoughtful attention. The plays that are important to the public are those that cheer, refine and amuse it,—appealing to its best feelings and instincts, broadening its vision, improving its taste, and augmenting its happiness. Such a play as “A Pair of Spectacles,” now presented by that rare comedian Mr. John Harle, at Abbey’s Theatre, is worth a whole hecatomb of “Masqueraders,” and “Mrs. Tanqueray.” The plays of the other kind, however, are more numerous, and, since shopkeepers are more numerous than genuine dramatic managers, the plays of the other kind are more frequently produced. But sound principles are not invalidated merely because they happen to be opposed by numbers. The importance of a play to the spectators is precisely commensurate with the good influence,—in other words, with the good that it can do.

A fresh specimen of the morbid drama of ill-fate and baleful consequence was disclosed at the Empire Theatre last night with the title of “Michael and His Lost Angel.” It comes from the prolific pen of Mr. Henry Arthur Jones, who has set up to be a moralist and gone regularly into the business of reforming mankind. The diligence with which that vocation is pursued in London might, perhaps, be thought to imply a great need for missionary labor in that capital. There is no need of it here. People can be found in America who will run after anything—even a street-sweeping machine—but the representative American public does not like plays on nasty subjects, and does not want them. Mr. Jones’s latest effort will have its day, but also it will very soon cease to be. There is some talent in the construction of it, and there is experience in some of the acting with which it is interpreted. Mr. Jones is a skilful dramatist. The author capable of writing “Judah” and the second act of “The Middleman” knows his art. Miss Viola Allen, Mr. Miller, Mr. Dobson and their associates are competent performers. If those considerations were authoritative, the production of “Michael and His Lost Angel” might be viewed as auspicious for the coming season.

The influence of the piece, however,—a morbid and painful subject—is distinctly bad, and that will hamper it. Its subject is the temptation of an over-righteous priest by an under-righteous woman. At the end of act first the priest, who is a widower, and his daughter—who has been misled and betrayed,—go into church and make a public confession of her sin whereupon the secretary is ravaged with grief and embittered with remorse. At the end of act second the priest is fascinated by an importunate lady who is supposed to be a widow from Australia. At the end of act second the priest, whose name is Michael, and his angel, the widow having been left over to him, are in love, and have a scene. At the end of act third the singers learn that their secret is known to the priest’s secretary, and also that the lady’s husband has come back. At the end of act fourth the priest has made a public confession.

At the end of act fifth the lady has died, the priest wishes to die, and the audience like the same desire. The play is a copy of “The Merchant of Venice,” and the Scene of Death, Maitland and Lida, is here freighted with the notion that all persons who have done wrong should at once go and die. Everybody, however—from what I can make out, it is an author who writes among uncommonly sympathetic people. For the rest, we are all miserable sinners, and that many of us are while we are separated from God, have not yet been found out; and that therefore we all ought to be charitable in our judgment of others.

This will be unanimously carried by all men of experience, but it was scarcely worth while to write such a self-evident proposition. Great stress was laid upon the importance of love—a subject upon which there is room for some difference of opinion—in this performance, which will much please the devotees of that passion, and Mr. Miller, as the person, preserved the immobility of a wooden image, together with the pell-mell gravity of Mr. Dobson. Mr. Dobson acted an easy part in a highly effective manner. The scenery is fine. There is a complete church scene—disguised with inappropriate love-making, and a choral service.

The President Michael Faversham..... Henry Milner  
Sir Loft Faversham..... W. H. Crompton  
Father Hilary..... George E. Bryant  
Andrew Gibbard..... E. D. Pease  
The Duke of Mark Donough..... E. V. Buckley  
Withcombe..... V. V. Allen  
Audrie Lieden..... Annie Adams  
Boys Gibbard..... Ellen Gail  
Mrs. Gibbard..... John P. Whitman  
Fanny Clover..... Organist

## BOITO’S “MEFISTOFELE.”

After an absence of twelve years from the local stage Boito’s opera “Mefistofele” was revived at the Metropolitan Opera House last night. The occasion was one of the kind that can be set down as interesting—which epithet, as the world knows, may mean much or little. Even since its first production the opera has had strange vicissitudes. Ridiculed, whistled, howled and hissed off the stage in Milan, where it was first brought forward, it became the chief admiration of the Italian public. When it was revived in Bologna a dozen years later, meanwhile it had been thoroughly revised by the poet-composer, and the first version never having been printed, the critical fraternity became exceedingly voluminous after the opera was accepted in Germany London and New-York, one of the much-mooted points being whether Boito deserved the work by his voluminous excusions, interpolations and changes (Faust was originally a baritone), or weakly surrounded his better judgment to the taste of the hot polli for the sake of a popular success. It is pretty fighting ground, and will remain such so long as the means of comparison are kept hidden, and a sentimental love for hero worship is fed by the notion that Boito has refused to permit any of his operas written since to be performed, because he is convinced the world will not appreciate his transcendent genius. This notion equally convenient to an indolent man or a colossal egoist, has been nurtured by many pretty stories, but unhappy as it had added nothing to our knowledge of Boito’s genius as a musician, and we have ever since had to build up our estimate of him by memos of “Mefistofele” and a study of his opera books written for Ponchielli and Verdi.

So far as the opera given last night is concerned, it is also interesting to bear in mind that our opportunities to hear it rested on the graciousness of Mme. Nilsson until Mme. Calvè came, who, let it be said in her honor, differs from most prima donne in being possessed of a consuming desire to exhibit her talents in as many lights as possible. The value of such an ambition is incalculable, and were ten times as indifferent to Boito’s opera as its merits and demerits deserve, an expression of gratitude and admiration for her could not be withheld. Therefore it is pleasant to record that “Mefistofele” was warmly welcomed last night, and it is almost a pity that it must still be held subject to critical judgment. When so viewed, the harshest criticisms to which it becomes subject are those which Boito not only invited, but compelled. There is a pretty strong opinion among his admirers that he is more poet and dramatist than musician. He has written much, but read more, and, having the blood of the barbarians, as well as the Romans, in his veins, he was unwilling to treat the subject of “Faust” as the Frenchmen, Barbier, Carre and Gounod, treated it. He was even inclined to oust the Germans on their own grounds, and so insisted that a “Faust” opera must cover both parts of Goethe’s allegorical phantasmagoria. Because he harbored this conviction he failed; because he attempted too much he accomplished too little. His opera is a thing of shreds and patches, a series of episodes not held together by anything to be read in the text, seen on the stage or heard in the music, but only to be discerned in the preface, which he printed in his opera book. And these things all work him harm. It is interesting, of course, because it gives us a glimpse into the workings of his mind, to know that Boito conceived Faust as a type of man athirst for knowledge, of whom Solomon was the Biblical prototype, Prometheus the mythological, and Manfred and Don Quixote in inexhaustible variety, as Faust is as a type of virtue, and therefore that this picturesque and conventional stage devil is akin to the serpent who tempted Eve, the vulture who tore at the vitals of Prometheus, the Thersites of Homer, and mirabolic diabolus the Falstaff of Shakespeare. Yet when one listens to his contractions of the things on the stage, does the flight of poetic imagination explain or excuse the fact that what is set before us as

a drama consists of a fantastic perversion of Goethe’s “Prologue in Heaven,” a fragment of the Easter scene, a smaller fragment of the scene in Faust’s study cell, with the poodle dog turned into a gray fiar? That, then, was the kernel of the Friar?—would any one believe it except he hears or reads it?, a bit of the garden scene in which Gretchen agreed to poison her mother within twenty minutes after meeting her lover, the scene of the witches Sabbath, the prison scene, the classical Sabbath, in which Faust is discovered in an amour with Helen of Troy, having just come from the death pallet of Gretchen, and the death of Faust as an old man and his salvation? Can any one who knows that music, even in its most dramatic estate, must act as a clog on dramatic action, imagine how such a variety of scenes could be combined into a logical, consistent, truthful and sufficiently developed whole compassed by the space of four hours in performance? This “Faust” (or “Mefistofele”) is proved to be a misnomer by the very fact that Boito tried to cover so much of Goethe’s philosophical purpose, is, for the study rather than the stage. Then many things challenge admiration. As an opera it can have only a careless public, one willing to see Gretchen die in the arms of her lover in one act. Then again inviting the love of her deceased. Of course, the secret of the play is that the music is so full of original and characteristic beauty that it would easily miss any brave director. How many scenes are dramatically disturbing. How many scenes are musically beautiful. To know what the composer’s purpose is introducing is to learn it one must read Goethe, then his compositions; then Boito’s preface; then the libretto; Rhine was unknown to the first muse; Helen to the second; and Gretchen to the third. What is Helen? What is Boito’s wife? His music is a mixture of the national colors of America and Holland. The Stars and Stripes received an equally reverential regard with the orange colors of the mother country.

The characteristic features of good cheer and conviviality, which have so distinctly marked the previous dinners of the society, were well to the fore last night, and contributed in a large degree to the universal heartiness of the evening.

## WHO WERE THERE.

Dr. D. B. St. John Roosa, the president of the society, occupied the central seat at the cross-table with him were George M. Van Hoosen, Judge Dugay, Judge Truax, Judge Van Wyck, Warner Van Norden, James S. Coleman, St. Patrick’s

Faust:

Forma ideal pensum  
Della bell’ eterna eternit.  
Un nemo est posterna,  
Riparo a’ ridi e’ sventura.  
Volta un’ eterna eterna  
Tutti pupilla bruna.  
Arca come in luna.



DR. D. B. ST. JOHN ROOSA.

Society; Henry E. Howland, New-England Society; Dr. S.age Mackay, Major-General Ringer, Consultant-Planter, Professor Van Amringe, General E. L. Viele, J. Kennedy Tal, St. Andrew’s Church; Edward King, St. Nicholas Chapel; F. W. J. Harst, St. George’s Society; John R. Abney, Southern Society; F. J. de Peyster, Colonial Wars; and Ferdinand Morris, Colonial Order. There were over four hundred members and guests seated around the tables.

The president in rising to open the oratory of the evening was warmly greeted. After extending to the guests the customary welcome he proceeded in an irresistible style to extol the virtues of the Dutchmen, and to instance in more serious manner the achievements of the Hollander in the history of America. Civil and religious liberty, he maintained, was born in Holland and by the natives of that country instituted in America. Amid many outbursts of laughter he continued: “Why are we the salt of the earth. We do not pretend to be the bread and butter, we are the salt—and I think the Dutch salted some people I know pretty freely. I think they have salted New-York, too. If you want to see the place where the Yankees is salt, pepper, mustard, and all sorts of things, go to Boston, but we prefer New-York. The Dutch people are content with a very modest portion in life so long as they control all the destiny of the earth.”

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